To: Chair of Committee on Governmental Operations, Council Member Cabrera
From: Noel Hidalgo, Executive Director of BetaNYC
Re: Oversight - Committee on Governmental Operations Transparency

Monday, 25 February 2019

Dear Chair of Committee on Governmental Operations, Council Member Cabrera and Committee Members,

It is an honor to have this opportunity to represent New York City's civic technology, design, and data community and the research we've done with the Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer, Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams, and the City's Community Boards.

I am the Executive Director of BetaNYC, a member-driven, good-government non-profit organization. *We are advocates for a City government that is for the people, by the people, and for the digital era.*

Our History

In 2009, a group of neighbors started meeting to discuss the future of public data and technology because they were concerned about a lack of open data and expensive technology procurements.

Over the last ten years, our 5,100+ members have sought to improve people's lives through technology, data and design.[1] We have watched the past three Public Advocates appoint COPIC members, host one meeting per term, and walk out of the office with little accomplishment. We have watched every Public Advocate publish flowery press releases only for them to disappear like tears in rain.

In 2012, we joined with Council Member Gale A Brewer to support the City's open data law. COPIC's absence is why we fought for the City's open data law.

In 2014, we published a *People's Roadmap to a Digital New York City*[2]. It outlined how our City could adopt modern, agile practices to meet pressing needs for a more efficient, participatory, and transparent government. Additionally, we proposed 34 ideas that resulted in the following transformative legislation:
- placing the City Record online and in a machine readable format,
- ensuring that our Charter and laws are owned by the people, not a corporation,
- strengthening the NYC's open data laws[3] through seven interlocking pieces of legislation,
- Formalizing the City's Chief Analytics Officer and the Mayor's Office of Data Analytics into the charter.

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[1] https://www.meetup.com/betanyc/

[2] http://nycroadmap.us

[3] https://opendata.cityofnewyork.us/open-data-law/

Our Research and Programs

The *People's Roadmap* outlined ideas that required government partnership. And, for the past four years, we have worked successfully with the Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams, Mayor's Office of Data Analytics, Manhattan and Brooklyn Community Boards, CUNY Service Corps, the Fund for the City of New York, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to study and test how communication technologies and open data can equip the public to improve their decision-making.

Our Civic Innovation Lab and Fellowship is incubated out of the Manhattan Borough President's Office and includes the following list of achievements.
- educated, mentored, and employed over 50 City University of New York undergraduates[4]
- the nation's first FREE municipal open data bootcamp[5]
- A suite of specialized open data tools for community boards[6]
- suggestions on how community board could better use communication technologies, including their websites (which DOITT is working on)[7]
- convinced DOITT to be a part of the district needs process
- we've documented, in detail, how information flows through community board meetings and the data they need to improve decision making[8]
- we've taught over one thousand New Yorkers how to put NYC's open data to use
- we've enriched a local community of open data professionals and advocates by hosting three annual citywide open data festivals, with the fourth co-hosted with MODA[9] coming up on Saturday, 2 March.

Highlighted prototypes we have built
- BoardStat[10] — a tool built with Community Boards for Community Boards that demystifies NYC 311 service request data.
- BoardTrack[11] — is a community board attendance tracking tool and data standard that helps community board staff submit attendance records.
- SLAM (State Liquor Authority Mapper)[12] — is a tool that aggregates data that community boards often have to gather in order to review liquor license applications and sidewalk cafe applications.

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[4] https://beta.nyc/programs/civic-innovation-lab/

[5] https://beta.nyc/products/nyc-opendata-classes/

[6] https://beta.nyc/products/

[7] https://beta.nyc/publications/betanycs-civic-innovation-fellows-community-board-technology-needs-report-2018/

[8] https://beta.nyc/publications/

[9] https://schoolofdata.nyc

[10] https://beta.nyc/products/boardstat/

[11] https://beta.nyc/products/boardtrack/

[12] https://beta.nyc/products/slam/

- Tenants Map[13] — (alpha prototype) residential buildings with rent-regulated units throughout Manhattan and their volume of housing safety-related 311 service requests, which is updated daily.

Reports & Insights

Briefly, I would like to highlight the insights we gleaned from our three reports on Community Board Technology needs.

Community Board Technology Needs

We have dedicated two years to interviewing Community Boards to understand their needs. First, in 2015, we documented massive gaps in tools, services, and technology. This report laid the foundation for our Civic Innovation Fellows program.[14] In 2018, we performed a follow up report with intimate, on the record, statements.[15]

Drawing from interviews with community board district managers and staff, our second report distills boards' most salient technology needs and provides broad recommendations and best practices to adopt. This report justifies the need for new technology categories in the District Statement of Needs, and is meant to help community boards tailor their asks in the next District Statement of Needs cycle.

A brief summary of needs
- Trainings on software and digital practices
- Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) software & trainings.
- Office productivity tools like Microsoft Office, especially Excel. Support to migrate to Google G-Suite for email, calendaring, word processing, spreadsheets, and presentations.
- High speed internet at district offices with secure, public Wi-Fi capabilities.
- Office equipment & updated staff computers / dual screens / laptops
- Multifunction, large format copy machines
- Updated phone systems
- Paperless solutions, like tablets / iPads for Community Board members to receive meeting agenda items like applications, presentation material, or proposals.
- A desire to digitize archives and create a database of board resolutions.
- Live streaming hardware kits — ie dedicated equipment to live stream or record events / meetings.
- Event presentation kits — dedicated equipment that integrates with the live streaming kit to use at events / meetings.
- Improved website content management systems and training.
- Mass emailing best practices
- Social media best practices

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[13] https://beta.nyc/products/tenants-map/
[14] https://beta.nyc/publications/official-report-on-the-2015-nyc-civic-innovation-fellows/
[15] https://beta.nyc/publications/betanycs-civic-innovation-fellows-community-board-technology-needs-report-2018/

- Real-time Group Communication Tools, ie Slack
- Better integration / notification of 311 service requests
  - To track constituents' 311 service requests
  - To easily file requests on behalf of constituents

Community Boards' Data Challenges[16]

While many of the boards that BetaNYC interviewed outlined specific use cases for which the board would like to leverage city and state data resources, they also acknowledged the challenges to doing so. Sometimes, the data they wish to leverage has not been published by the City, is not up-to-date, or is categorized in a way that makes it irrelevant to addressing their issue. At other times, community boards do not have the time, skills, or technical infrastructure to work with data resources effectively. Boards are also concerned that ignoring biases in city and state datasets will lead them to overlook certain community issues, misrepresent marginalized populations, or propagate a culture of surveillance.

Recommendations
- Invest in technology and information infrastructure improvements for community boards based on researched and documented needs;
- Prioritize digital and data resources that enhance and support civic engagement;
- Demand that agencies improve technology support and release pertinent data;
- Sponsor digital and data literacy training for community boards and the public

Database on community needs for Community Boards

As of January 2018, we have started working with Sahana Foundation[17] to further prototype and develop a tool to help community boards track constituent needs. We are working with a select group of Community Boards to build a solution that addresses their specific needs, enhances their existing workflows, and gives them a foundation that they own and we can iterate on. This would be done through a three step process. Phase 1→ Research, build, and launch an alpha CRM prototype that Community Boards own and can modify. Phase 2 → Research, customize, and deploy this prototype that Community Boards own and can modify. Phase 3 → Host trainings and provide support.

We are offering to do this for $10,000 per Community Board. Currently, we have 11 Boards signed up for this project.

Conclusion

We are doing this work because we believe that healthy, functional communities need healthy, functional community boards, and that requires adapting to the digital era. DOITT continues to express limited resources and ability to help address community board needs, therefore we have stepped in.

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[16] https://beta.nyc/publications/data-design-challenges-and-opportunities-for-nyc-community-boards/
[17] https://sahanafoundation.org/